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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000183

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [MY](#)

SUBJECT: POST-ELECTION VIEWS FROM EAST MALAYSIA

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 160 - MALAYSIA'S ELECTION SHOCK

[¶](#)B. KUALA LUMPR 178 - UMNO STOKES MALAY FEARS

Classified By: Classified By: POLITICAL SECTION CHIEF MARK D. CLARK, RE
ASON 1.4 (B AND D).

Summary

[¶](#)1. (C) East Malaysians, whose support in the March 8 election provided Prime Minister Abdullah with the necessary majority to form the new government, are closely watching what opposition parties do with their newly won states, especially Penang, according to our contacts in Sabah and Sarawak on March 14. If they are successful, the opposition parties could make significant gains in East Malaysia during the next election. A journalist speculated that East Malaysia would have voted for the opposition if it had known how well the opposition would fare on the peninsula. The fact that East Malaysian parliamentary seats are now essential for Abdullah's National Front government has generated high expectations in Sabah and Sarawak of stronger representation in the Prime Minister's cabinet. Given the ruling National Front's (BN) vulnerabilities on the peninsula, the Prime Minister cannot afford political missteps in Sabah and Sarawak as he struggles to remain in power. End Summary.

View from Sabah

[¶](#)2. (C) We spoke on March 14 with contacts in the East Malaysia states of Sabah and Sarawak to find out what people are saying about the election. Jaswendar Kaur, a journalist for the government-influenced New Strait Times (NST), told poloff that if Sabah's general election were held 3-4 days after the peninsula's and its strong opposition showing, Sabah would have gone with the opposition. She said people, especially from rural communities, remember when Sabah voted against BN in the early 1990s. Afterwards, the federal government froze Sabah out of federal funding until the next general election as punishment. Not willing to be the lone voice, Sabahans voted BN. However when combined, opposition candidates won the popular vote. Within Sabah, the opposition parties lacked the cooperation achieved in West Malaysia. As a result, many of the election races had multiple candidates vying against a BN opponent. As in prior elections, allegations of vote rigging in key races were widespread, including allegations that some election officials were complicit in the rigging. Sabahans are watching how the opposition will run the key state of Penang to measure the opposition's effectiveness.

[¶](#)3. (C) Dominic Lim, Coordinator for the Catholic Diocese's

Human Development Committee told poloff that if the opposition successfully runs Penang, BN "will lose" its hold on Sabah. However, Sabahans are slow to embrace Anwar Ibrahim. He is widely remembered in Sabah from his days as Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister, when he spoke disparagingly about Sabah. Dominic told us Anwar must win the trust of Sabahans through action and not words. The burden is on Anwar to show he is no longer a Muslim fundamentalist. Sabahans mistrust peninsular-based parties because of their experience with the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) after the party gained entry into Sabah. Sabahans voted on the merits of individual opposition candidates and not for their parties. A Sabah-based opposition party could expect to find strong support, but as contacts noted, Sabah lacks a strong leader capable of uniting Sabahans across ethnicities (Kadazan, Chinese, and Malay). The key issues dominating Sabah's local politics during the election continued to be the status of thousands of illegal aliens residing in Sabah and land being seized by businesses, sometimes in violation of indigenous customary law.

View from Sarawak

¶4. (C) According to Father Simon Poh, Chancellor to Catholic Archbishop John Ha, Sarawak's voters split mostly along urban and rural lines. Urban voters leaned towards the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) and rural voters, dependent upon federal government funding for development, voted BN. However, a common consensus of our contacts is that the people want change. If the opposition could cooperate in Sarawak, they could make significant gains in future elections. Sarawakians accepted DAP, which focuses on political issues. However, they distrust both Anwar's

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People's Justice Party (PKR) and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Sarawakians perceive both parties using religion for political gain and fear they will bring an Islamic agenda to Sarawak. (Note: PAS does not have a presence in Sarawak and DAP and PKR are not on good terms with each other in the state. End Note.) The Catholic Church, while publicly neutral, privately favors a change from BN and advised parishioners to "vote their conscience." Sarawakians, like Sabahans, are closely watching how the opposition will run their newly controlled states.

¶5. (C) Nancy Nais (protect), journalist for NST, told poloff that vote buying was widespread in the rural areas, with alleged payments ranging from about USD30-130 (50-200 Malaysian Ringgit). She also described how during the campaign period, UMNO sent censors to the editorial offices for NST, and other government-influenced mainstream press. The teams were empowered to edit or stop publication of all articles. After the election and because of the opposition's strong gains, the NST's senior editors distributed a memorandum informing all NST offices they "must now provide balanced reporting" of the opposition.

Comment

¶6. (C) The people in East Malaysia are awakening to their new political leverage, holding 51 of BN's 138 parliamentary seats. East Malaysia's consequently anticipate a greater number and more important cabinet positions. Just as important as the number of cabinet positions will be who fills them. Sabahans and Sarawakians will fill cheated once more by the peninsula if ethnic Malays, a minority in Malaysian Borneo, dominate the Cabinet appointments allocated to East Malaysia. Given BN's vulnerabilities on the peninsula, the Prime Minister cannot afford political missteps in Sabah and Sarawak as he struggles to remain in power.

KEITH